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ABSTRACT

This study examined children's conceptions of authority in sexually abusive situations. It aimed to determine: (1) whether children's perceptions of adult authority in sexually abusive situations differed from their perceptions of adult authority in benign situations; (2) whether children's conceptions of authority changed as a result of participation in a sexual abuse education program; and (3) whether children's conceptions of authority outweighed attempts to teach them to recognize and resist sexual advances. Participants were 117 children of 3 to 6 years of age, from 4 preschools. The sexual abuse education program was an interactive curriculum consisting of five 20-minute segments that emphasized the message "No, Go, and Tell." Children were administered several measures before and after their participation in the program. The most important measures in this study were the What If Situations Test and an authority scale developed for the study. Results suggest that many preschoolers were able to delineate clear limits to adult authority in sexual abuse situations even before they participated in the program. This finding applied regardless of the child's age. In addition, the prevention program seems to give children new information about authority in sexual situations, or it may confirm the knowledge they already have in this area. Implications for further research are discussed. Appended are six references and related materials. (GLR)

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DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF AUTHORITY IN RELATION TO SEXUAL ABUSE EDUCATION

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Introduction

William Damon (1977) suggests that for a child to accept the authority of another, the legitimacy of that person must be recognized and the child must articulate a rationale for obedience. Legitimacy is the perception of another's prerogative to lead or command. A rationale for obedience concerns why and under what circumstances one should obey or disobey. (See Table 1) Damon found that children progress through six stages of adult authority beginning with cognitions focused on egocentric desires and ending with a greater understanding of situationally appropriate behavior.

The first two lessons taught in most sexual abuse prevention programs are directly related to both rationales for legitimacy and obedience. First, teaching children to recognize that it is inappropriate for an adult to ask for sexual favors has the implicit message that the perpetrator has no legitimate rationale for the request. The second lesson taught by most programs is that children should say no to the perpetrator; that is, the child should not obey the request.

Most studies have examined children's perceptions of authority in commonly occurring social situations. However, several studies have shown that in stories where adults encourage children to break certain social norms (for example, to keep fighting), children as young as five reject the legitimacy of that adult's authority (Laupa & Turiel, 1986; Tisak, 1986), and

obedience does not always follow, particularly for older children (Damon, 1977; Laupa & Turiel, 1986). To date, no research has examined children's conceptions of authority in sexually abusive situations. This study attempted to do so.

There were three research questions. First, were children's perceptions of adult authority in sexually abusive and benign situations different or similar? Second, did children's conceptions of authority change as a result of participation in a sexual abuse education program? Third, did cognitive developmental stages of authority supersede attempts to teach young children to recognize and resist sexual advances?

Method

Participants were 117 children, ages 3 to 6, attending four preschools. All children had parental consent and gave their assent before participating in this study. Children were matched for gender and randomly assigned to a treatment or a delayed treatment control group. The intervention was the Grossmont College Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program. This is an interactive curriculum consisting of five, twenty minute segments that emphasize the message "No, Go, and Tell."

Children were administered several measures before and after the first administration of the curriculum. After posttesting, control children received the curriculum. The measures relevant to this study are the "What If Situations Test" (WIST, Saslawsky & Wurtele, 1986) and an authority scale developed for this study.

The WIST consisted of five hypothetical situations (four

sexual abuse situations and one benign touch situation). Each story measures recognition of the appropriateness of the request and the four sexual abuse stories also query children about their ability to refuse the request, leave the situation, find a trusted adult, and correctly inform this adult about the abuse.

The authority scale consists of two stories. The benign story involves a mother requesting that her child clean his/her room before going on a picnic; this request is identical to one used in Damon's research. The sexual story entails an adult male offering a child a present if the child agrees to let the man touch his/her private parts.

The questions for the benign story were those used by Damon in his clinical interviews; the questions for the sexually abusive story were written to correspond to the benign questions. Questions were coded for one of Damon's levels of authority and a modal authority score was derived for each story. Thus, each child had two authority scores at both pretest and posttest, one for the benign story and one for the sexual story. (Copies of this measure may be obtained from the first author.)

Results

Authority in Abusive vs. Benign Situations

Our first research question was whether children's perceptions of adult authority differed in sexually abusive or benign situations. A *t*-test between pretest authority scores on the two stories indicated that children received significantly higher scores on the sexual story as compared to the benign story

($t(100) = -3.06$, $p < .01$; Ms = 2.26 vs. 2.69; respectively). Children score only in the first three authority stages for the benign story, whereas they score in all six stages for the sexual story. Age and gender were unrelated to authority scores on both stories ($F(2,106) = .56$, $F(1,106) = .29$; respectively). (See Table 2.)

Program Effects on Authority

Our second research question was whether children's authority scores changed as a result of participation in a sexual abuse education program. A repeated measures 2 X 3 X 2 ANOVA (time, age, and condition) for each of the stories was conducted. There were no significant effects for the benign story. For the sexual story, the Condition X Time interaction was significant ($F(1,82) = 4.09$, $p < .05$). The experimental and control groups had similar authority scores at pretest (experimental $M = 2.71$; control $M = 2.87$); however, at posttest the experimental group's score increased ($M = 3.06$) whereas the control group's decreased ($M = 2.46$). (See Figure 1.)

Relationship of WIST to Authority

The third research question was whether children's notions of authority would outweigh attempts to teach them to recognize and resist inappropriate sexual advances. We believed RECOGNITION and SAY NO were the WIST components most related to authority.

First, two hierarchical regressions using pretest data were run using RECOGNITION and SAY NO as the dependent variables. The

pretest sexual authority score accounted for little or no variance in these two equations. (See Table 3.) Second, we examined program changes by performing two hierarchical regressions with RECOGNITION and SAY NO posttest scores as the dependent variables. The variable of interest, pretest sexual authority score, did not account for a significant amount of variance in either equation. (See Table 4.)

Conclusion

Concerns are often raised that concepts taught in sexual abuse prevention programs may be too sophisticated, particularly for young children, and that children might misinterpret or be alarmed by the information presented (Reppucci & Haugaard, 1989). Our findings suggest that, even prior to participating in the program, many preschoolers are able to delineate clear limits to adult authority in sexual abuse situations. This finding held regardless of the age of the child; the youngest children in our study were three years of age. Further, the prevention program seems to offer new, or perhaps confirming information about authority in sexual situations. For experimental children, authority scores on the sexual story increased as a result of participation in the prevention program. And these increases occurred in the two highest levels of authority (categories 5 and 6).

These results are encouraging, but must be tempered by certain methodological problems. The two stories compared sexual and benign situations, but they confounded gender and status of

the authority figures. As Liang and McGrath (1991) note, characteristics of the perpetrator may have a strong influence on children's responses. Future research should more closely match information in sexual and benign authority stories.

In summary, by age 3, many children seem to have encoded a fairly sophisticated understanding of the limits of adult authority in a sexually abusive encounter. We did not find a relationship between WIST knowledge and authority. However, the situations in which abuse occurs may be more complicated than the fairly straightforward dilemmas on which we have data. Current research on authority, including ours, has not presented dilemmas where an adult cajoles a child to comply with a request based on alternative moral grounds. After the child's initial refusal, the adult might plead for the child's submission based on entreaties for kindness or fairness, moral issues that Damon (1977) reminds us are extremely salient to young children.

Our stories, and those of the developmental researchers, also need to assess children's responses if they are faced with conflicts between legitimacy and possible negative consequences. This type of situation would certainly more realistically portray certain types of child-rearing techniques as well as the type of threats that often occur in sexually abusive situations.

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TABLE 1

CHILDREN'S STAGES OF AUTHORITY

LEVEL	AUTHORITY LEGITIMIZED BY:	BASIS FOR OBEDIENCE
1	Love; identification with child	Authority's commands linked to child's desires
2	Physical attributes	Obedience is a means for achieving child's desires
3	Social and physical power	Respect for power
4	Special ability, talent, or actions	Superior abilities or past favors
5	Prior training or experience with leadership	Awareness of authority figure's concern for child
6	Situationally appropriate attributes of leadership	Spirit of cooperation between authority and child

From: Damon, W. (1983). Social and personality development. NY: W.W. Norton.

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF CHILDREN SCORING AT EACH AUTHORITY STAGE - PRETEST

Authority Level	Sexual story	Benign story
1	n = 12	4
2	51	78
3	18	30
4	3	0
5	18	0
6	1	0

$\underline{M}$ = 2.69 $\underline{M}$ = 2.26

n = 103 n = 112

t (100) = -3.06, $\underline{p} < .01$

TABLE 3

REGRESSION ANALYSES WITH PRETEST DATA

Dependent Variables	Step	Predictor Variables	F Change	Cum. R^2
RECOGNITION	1	Sexual authority score	.123	.001
	2	Age	10.146**	.099
	3	Gender	.130	.101
SAY NO	1	Sexual authority score	4.693*	.048
	2	Age	15.074***	.180
	3	Gender	1.497	.194

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

TABLE 4

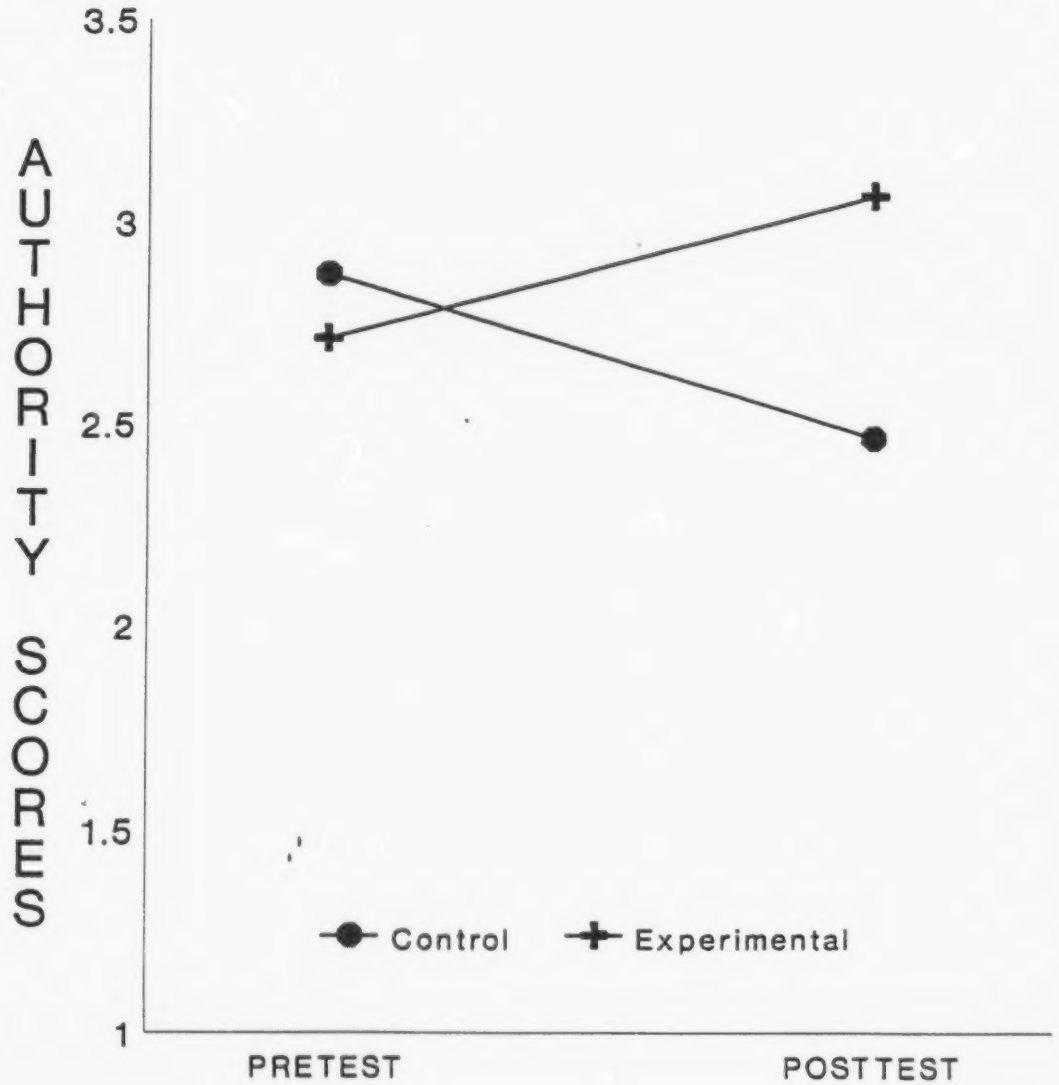
PREDICTORS OF POSTTEST RECOGNITION AND SAY NO SCORES

Step	Predictor Variables	F Change		Cum. R^2	
		REC	SAY NO	REC	SAY NO
1	Pretest RECOGNITION or SAY NO	18.141***	22.560***	.171	.204
2	Pretest sexual authority score	.023	.658	.171	.210
3	Condition	2.404	2.377	.194	.231
4	Age	1.988	.935	.212	.240
5	Gender	.129	.359	.213	.243

*** $p < .001$

FIGURE 1

CONDITION BY TIME INTERACTION FOR AUTHORITY SCORES



$F = 4.09, p < .05$